

Preface

The object of this study is the attempt—by means of an investigation of the exemplary case of monasticism—to construct a form-of-life, that is to say, a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it. It is from this perspective that the study is confronted first of all with the problem of the relationship between rule and life, which defines the apparatus through which the monks attempted to realize their ideal of a communal form of life. What is at stake is not so much—or not only—the task of investigating the imposing mass of punctilious precepts and ascetic techniques, of cloisters and *horologia*, of solitary temptations and choral liturgies, of fraternal exhortations and ferocious punishments through which cenoby constituted itself as a “regular life” in order to achieve salvation from sin and from the world. Rather, it is first of all a matter of understanding the dialectic that thus comes to be established between the two terms *rule* and *life*. This dialectic is indeed so dense and complex that, in the eyes of modern scholars, it seems to resolve itself at times into a perfect identity: *vita vel regula* (“life or rule”), according to the preamble of the *Rule of the Fathers*, or in the words of Francis’s *Regula non bullata*, *haec est regula et vita fratrum minorum . . .* (“The rule and life of the Friars Minor is this . . .”). Here it is preferable, however, to leave to the *vel* and the *et* all their semantic ambiguity, in order instead to look at the monastery as a field of forces run through

by two intensities that are opposed and, at the same time, intertwined. In their reciprocal tension something new and unheard-of, that is, a form-of-life, has persistently approached its very realization and has just as persistently missed it. The great novelty of monasticism is not the confusion of life and norm or a new declension of the relationship between fact and right. Rather, it is the identification of a level of consistency that is unthought and perhaps today unthinkable, which the syntagmas *vita vel regula*, *regula et vita*, *forma vivendi*, *forma vitae* sought laboriously to name, and in which both *rule* and *life* lose their familiar meaning in order to point in the direction of a third thing. Our task is precisely to bring this third thing to light.

In the course of this study, however, what has appeared to present an obstacle to the emergence and comprehension of this third thing is not so much the insistence on apparatuses that can appear to be juridical to modern people, like the vow and the profession. Rather, it is a phenomenon that is absolutely central in the history of the Church and opaque for modern people: the liturgy. The great temptation of the monks was not that which paintings of the Quattrocento have fixed in the seminude female figure and in the shapeless monsters that assail Antony in his hermitage, but the will to construct their life as a total and unceasing liturgy or Divine Office. Hence this study, which proposed initially to define form-of-life by means of the analysis of monasticism, has had to contend with the unforeseen and, at least in appearance, misleading and extraneous task of an archeology of duty [*ufficio*] (the results of which are published in a separate volume with the title *Opus Dei: An Archeology of Duty*).

Only a preliminary definition of this paradigm—which is at once ontological and practical, interwoven with being and acting, with the divine and the human, and which the Church has not stopped modeling and articulating in the course of its history, from the first, uncertain prescriptions of the *Apostolic Constitutions* up to the meticulous architecture of the *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* of William Durand of Mende (thirteenth century) and the calculated sobriety of the encyclical *Mediator Dei* (1947)—could

actually allow us to comprehend the experience, at once very near and remote, that was in question in form-of-life.

If the comprehension of the monastic form of life could be achieved only by means of a continuous opposition to the liturgical paradigm, what is perhaps the crucial test of the study could only be found, however, in the analysis of the spiritual movements of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which culminate in Franciscanism. Insofar as they situate their central experience no longer on the level of doctrine and law, but on the level of life, they appear from this perspective as the moment that was in every respect decisive in the history of monasticism, in which its strength and its weakness, its successes and its failings reached their greatest tension.

The book closes, therefore, with an interpretation of the message of Francis and of the Franciscan theory of poverty and use. On the one hand, a premature legend and an immense hagiographic literature have covered this theory over with the too-human mask of the *pazzus* and the fool or with the no-longer-human mask of a new Christ. On the other hand, an exegesis more attentive to the facts than to their theoretical implications has enclosed Francis's message in the confines of the history of law and of the Church. In one case as in the other, what remained untouched was perhaps the most precious legacy of Franciscanism, to which the West must return ever anew to contend with it as its undeferrable task: how to think a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation. That is to say again: to think life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use.

Such a task will demand the elaboration of a theory of use—of which Western philosophy lacks even the most elementary principles—and, moving forward from that, a critique of the operative and governmental ontology that continues, under various disguises, to determine the destiny of the human species. This task remains reserved for the final volume of *Homo sacer*.